

# YEAR-ROUND FISHING

Every spring, North Dakota anglers anxious to cast a line into open, clear, cold water instead of dropping a bait through a hole in the ice must wait ... wait for a period of a few weeks when ice is no longer safe for travel, but spring sunshine has not yet melted winter's cover.

Whenever that anticipated "ice-out" occurs – whether it's early March on the Missouri River, or even into late April on a Turtle Mountain Lake – a fishing outing is just the next nice-enough day away. It hasn't always been that way.

For many years in North Dakota, dating back at least into the early 1930s, fishing season for game fish on most state waters was closed for several weeks between mid-March and early May. The primary reason was to prevent game fish like walleye and northern pike from being caught and kept before they could spawn for the year.

In March 1933, *North Dakota OUTDOORS* answered the question, "Why we have closed seasons on game fish."

*"It is a fact well known to observers that the best fishing is to be had early in the spring when game fish are found in the shallow waters of our lakes, or rivers. The primary purpose of the restrictive laws on the taking of game fish is the conserving of these natural resources and not the curbing of the recreation and pleasure of our citizens ...*

*"... When such a (female) fish is taken early in the spring before the spawning process is completed the angler has in reality destroyed a large number of fish, and it is for this reason that protection in the early spring is not only desirable but necessary."*

This philosophy prevailed for decades over much of North Dakota, except for the Missouri River and lakes Sakakawea and Oahe, where fishing for game fish had always been open year-round. In the rest of the state, fishing season closed in mid-March and opened again early in May.

It was certainly a logical management strategy. Ice-out on most lakes typically occurs from late March to late April. Northern pike spawn first, followed by walleye, and in most years spawning would be completed by the fishing season opener. No doubt many big, egg-laden females were saved because the fishing season was closed.

But over the years, fisheries managers began to question whether fishing was really all that good during April and early May, and whether enough fish were actually saved to make a difference.

North Dakota also had the added factor that in many lakes and reservoirs walleye and pike do not usually reproduce naturally – their populations are maintained by periodic stocking. In those waters, did it continue to make sense to prevent people from fishing when catching a big fish in April wouldn't hurt spawning potential at all?

After years of evaluation and consideration, in 1993 Game and Fish decided to make most waters in the state open to fishing year-round, eliminating the closed season and sacrificing the traditional "opening day" that served to concentrate a flurry of fishing activity into one weekend every spring.

At the time, it wasn't a particularly controversial decision, and in the 12 years since it really hasn't generated much widespread debate. But every spring, pictures of heavy, egg-bearing female pike or walleye caught from lakeshores – or below dams, or in constricted rivers or channels – raise concerns among some anglers.

And that's a good thing. It's evidence of the catch-and-release mindset many anglers have adopted over the last two or three decades. People don't want to see our resources abused, and they surely don't want the Game and Fish Department to set up rules that allow that to happen.

On the other hand, anglers demand opportunity and fisheries managers want to provide it, as long as it doesn't hurt the resource. And periodic questions allow biologists to reassure anglers that current regulations are working and there's no need to worry.

For instance, springtime walleye harvest in the creeks and channels that flow into the north side of Devils Lake, is one situation that raises annual concerns. Last spring, Game and Fish biologists estimated the April walleye harvest at Channel A, Mauvais Coulee and other conduits that enter Devils Lake, at 4,400 fish. This compares to an estimated harvest of 141,000 walleye taken from Devils Lake from May through July.

In addition to documenting a low (3 percent) April harvest, the size of walleyes caught during that time was also similar to those taken the rest of the year.

Biologists have also marked walleye fingerlings stocked in certain lakes to determine how much those stocked fish contributed to a year-class, compared to natural reproduction. Results vary, but it doesn't appear that current harvest during April and early May has any influence on natural reproduction success.

Over much of the state, anecdotal information indicates fishing pressure during what previously was a closed season is relatively light. Many anglers wait for the water to warm up and make fish more active.

In those locations where spring fishing pressure is heavy, Game and Fish biologists have not identified any situations where overharvest of ready-to-spawn females is the suspected cause of a fish population decline.

For the most part, a stringer full of big walleye or pike taken before the spawning run may make the anglers look like game hogs, but it doesn't hurt the fishery any more than catching and keeping those same fish over Memorial Day weekend.

Here's a look at some of the factors that continue to influence the decision to maintain year-round fishing in North Dakota.



*Opening day at Sweet Briar Dam in Morton County in the mid-1960s brought out a big crowd. These days, with year-round fishing, such concentrations of anglers do not occur as often, as early fishing pressure is spread out over several weeks.*

## One Side

- Year-round fishing provides at least six more weeks of fishing opportunity every season.
- A year-round season gives anglers a chance to pursue trophy northern pike along shorelines after ice-out.
- Anglers who catch pre-spawn fish always have the option of releasing them.
- A year-round season on the Missouri River System in North Dakota did not have any effect on walleye or pike populations long before the season was opened year-round statewide.
- Even with a year-round season, if fisheries managers identify specific areas where pre-spawn harvest may become a problem, they can close those areas to fishing or establish special regulations without reducing opportunity in other areas where potential overharvest is not an issue.
- In South Dakota and Nebraska, most state waters are open to all fishing year-round.

## The Other Side

- Having a year-round fishing season eliminates an "opening day," which served to generate enthusiasm and possibly license sales.
- Allowing harvest of pre-spawn fish promotes trophy fishing for some, instead of the overall fishing experience.
- Minnesota has an opening day and it is the most popular fishing day of the year.
- Year-round fishing creates a need for increased enforcement activity.

*What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at [ndgf@state.nd.us](mailto:ndgf@state.nd.us); call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*